

The Advantages of Volunteer-Assisted Research

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So often during my 20 years with The Smithsonian Associates (TSA) I heard from scientists that they needed additional funding and workers to turn their bright ideas into actual research projects. For these scholars TSA created a valuable source of support by establishing the Smithsonian Research Expeditions Program (SRE) in 1988. Every year SRE assists Smithsonian researchers and scientists launch approximately 40 projects in fields ranging from volcanology to art history.

"Citizen-scholars"—the title we have given to Smithsonian Associates who participate in Research Expedition projects—contribute both their time and financial support to a variety of research endeavors in the natural sciences, American history, the social sciences, Native American studies, marine biology, and astronomy. In return, they have the unique opportunity to study with Smithsonian scholars and work with the Smithsonian collections. This partnership between scientist and citizen is beneficial to both sides: the scientists gain labor and support for important projects; the Associates experience the rewards of scientific research and museum work.

Although many of our participants are professionals and educators, the projects they choose rarely relate to their work. Most have had a long, abiding interest in the topic, but only as an avocation or hobby. These expeditions are often the chance they have been looking for to immerse themselves in their favorite subject for a few weeks. Prior to the expedition, SRE provides additional background information about the research project to insure that everyone understands the work to be done. This may include books, articles, pamphlets, or a bibliography of works in the field. Once the expedition begins, the Smithsonian staff provides detailed training about the research or conservation methods to be used. Extracurricular activities for the project may include special tours of SI collections or lectures by other scholars about related fields of research.

For the volunteers there are many rewards for getting involved. They gain a greater appreciation for the care and use of the collections. During the expedition, they learn about an area of research and build a dialogue with professionals in that field. After the expedition, they return to their computers and businesses with a greater enthusiasm for their avocation. But the greatest reward mentioned by most volunteers is the bond created between them and their fellow team members. Working together in an unusual place on a unusual project for eight to 12 hours a day forges a closeness of purpose and experience for the participants. They have left their normal lives for a few weeks to work in a conservation lab, archives, or a field research site. And they have stepped beyond their everyday expectations to actively support the growth of scientific knowledge.

For Smithsonian scholars, this is a vital opportunity to fulfill two aspects of James Smithson's original bequest to create a place for the "increase and diffusion

of knowledge." Expeditions compile significant amounts of information in various fields while simultaneously educating people about the research in progress. Through the projects, scholars have the opportunity to interact directly with members of the public, rather than through their usual medium of the exhibition halls.

Some examples of Research Expeditions will illustrate more clearly the experiences of the participants and scientists.

This summer, for the fifth year in a row, Research Expedition participants will work in the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) to sort, organize, and catalog materials in the Museum archives. Each year NASM acquires thousands of historically important documents—aircraft technical manuals, military files, personal papers, photographs, and motion picture film. All these require proper housing and documentation to allow easy access for researchers and to safeguard them for future generations.

After the first day of training and orientation, the participants work directly with the materials. During this two-week project they will be at two sites, the Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage Facility in Maryland

and the Archives Mall Facility on the third floor of the NASM. In the past, participants have watched training films or newsreels to determine the proper category for cataloging, have sorted through aircraft manuals to weed out duplicate copies and to place them in acid-



Polynesian barkcloth has endured years of folded storage in the Smithsonian. Volunteers unfolded, cleaned, repaired, and prepared for storage these important anthropological samples. Photo by Eric Long, Smithsonian Institution, 1993.

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Volunteers do research at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. Photos courtesy the Smithsonian Institution.



free paper, or have identified and reorganized holdings in the aircraft technical files.

For a different experience with paper, consider the expedition, "Polynesian Barkcloth: Preserving a Tradition." Collected in the mid-1800s by a scientific expedition going through Samoa, Fiji, and Hawaii, these cloths have endured years of folded storage in the Smithsonian. Over time, they have become dusty, dirty, and stiff. To preserve these important anthropological samples they must be cleaned, unfolded, repaired, and stored in an appropriate environment.

After training sessions and a basic orientation given by Natalie Firnhaber, a conservator with the National Museum of Natural History, the Research Expedition volunteers were assigned a piece of the paper cloth to restore. By the end of the expedition, participants had completed the work for their piece, and prepared it for storage. Besides working with the barkcloth, they also viewed other items in the collections and learned about the history of polynesian barkcloths.

An entirely different type of research is also done with the help of SRE participants each year in August at Crow Agency, MT. Since 1913, the Crow Nation has held an annual Fair and Family Reunion on the reservation. This event brings the Crow together each year

to dance, renew acquaintances, and rejoice in their culture. I have been collecting data about contemporary Crow culture at the Fair for the last several years and have created an extensive anthropological record of the community.

Research Expedition participants help with this work by interviewing and recording what they see and experience at the Fair. After being trained in social science methods, citizen-scholars meet with members of the community to talk about a variety of topics, including family history, work, social relationships, and tribal history. They also take part in activities at the Fair, like the buffalo feed, and record their observations about their experiences. The data they record is then collated and given to the National Anthropological Archives (part of the Smithsonian) and to the Crow community.

One last example of our research opportunities is the weekend experience for parents and teenagers to work in Front Royal, VA. Since 1975, at a special 3,100-acre Smithsonian facility in the Shenandoah Valley, the Smithsonian Conservation and Research Center has been entrusted with the task of preserving endangered species and studying local flora and fauna. Currently, scientists are studying the impact of white-tailed deer on the vegetation and other animals in the deer's territory.

Participants on this project will be observing and recording information about the birds and small mammals in the Valley. They will set up mist nets and traps, record information on captured birds and animals, and then release them. The information gathered will give scientists an idea of how other animal populations fare in areas with and without deer. Although this is the first expedition for parents and their teenage children to work together on projects, we hope to expand this experiment in the future. Dr. Bill McShea, wildlife biologist at the Smithsonian, will train the participants working with the data collected during the expedition.

In the seven years since Smithsonian Research Expeditions began, over 100 projects have been completed with the help of over 650 volunteers. Data collected on the projects has gone into archives, museum exhibitions, and scholarly books and articles. For SI scholars, the program has provided funding and labor for important research projects which might never have been completed otherwise. But the most gratifying impact has been on our volunteers. SRE has given to "citizen-scholars" the rare opportunity to see and experience documents, materials, and cultures which play an integral part in our world.

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